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AUTHOR Broersma, David H.
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ABSTRACT

A teacher's search for a coherent explanation for the resistance of students to high school literature programs, vitally important since student attitudes influence learning, resulted in a discovery of both external and internal causal factors. Externally, an increasing emphasis on competency testing hinders the fostering of lifelong literacy. Poor textbook selection often contributes to a lack of enthusiasm among students. Ineffective teaching methods, especially those focusing on what Louise Rosenblatt has called "efferent" as opposed to "aesthetic" response, deny students a vital relationship with literature. Often the reading has little or no relevance for young adults. Internally, students may have negative attitudes toward literature resulting from unmet personal needs or emotional problems. Students also bring differing levels of ability to a reading, and sometimes they lack meaningful background information for a text. Central to the task of teaching literature should always be a desire to infect young people with an appreciation of literature. Despite the failure of high schools to foster such an appreciation, most teachers continue to teach literature in the same way. If students are to start enjoying literature, teachers must give them the chance to build their own reservoirs of literary experience; teachers must broaden their own understanding of what it means to appreciate literature; and classroom discussion must be relevant to students' needs and desires. Finally, teachers must utilize theoretically sound approaches to literature instruction. (Thirty-three footnotes are included.) (HB)

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David H. Broersma
EDFA 500D
Dr. S. Samuel Shermis
Philosophy of Education
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The Appreciation Gap:
Examining Student Attitudes to Classroom Literature

Introduction

The search for a coherent explanation for the resistance of students to high school literature programs led me first to a reflection on my own experiences as a student and a teacher. When I began my high school career, I was a hard-core reading addict. I read everything I could find. Yet, almost without exception, my memories of high school English are negative. The only English class I enjoyed was an independent reading elective which had virtually no interference from a teacher. English in high school was mind-numbingly boring and irrelevant for me, and the thought of a career in teaching English was preposterous. Almost eight years after high school, I began my undergraduate degree in English Education. Why? In those eight years I rediscovered the pleasure of reading and talking about books.

As a teacher, I quickly discovered that my students come to the first day of my literature class with firmly established attitudes which range from indifference to open hostility. I have had some limited success in mitigating the effects of the emotional baggage they bring with them, but my experience has highlighted for me the need to explore these attitudes further and learn from them. I am not satisfied with foisting on my students a green vegetable approach to literature (consume it because it is good for you); I want my students to know the pleasure of meaningful interactions with texts.

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Educators have recognized for many years that students have a less than cordial relationship with literature and literature instruction. In fact, it almost seems that the fastest way to make sure that a work of literature is universally despised and rejected is to include it in a high school curriculum.[1] Even dynamic, expert teachers have to struggle to overcome the prejudices of the majority of their students, while journals are full of clever suggestions for overcoming the barriers erected by lackadaisical adolescents. Recognizing that student attitudes influence learning, educators have attempted to evaluate the reasons for students' problematic responses, so they can deal with them appropriately. The result has been a discovery of both external and internal causal factors.

External Factors

In recent years, the decisions of state legislatures have played an increasingly instrumental role in the classroom by their implementation of testing programs to establish whether or not students are acquiring "basic skills." One of the primary complaints about the testing programs centers on the way the tests manipulate teachers into teaching for the test. Joseph Sanacore, discussing hindrances to lifetime literacy, states, "Foremost [amongst dominant negative influences] is the competency testing frenzy that pressures administrators and teachers into viewing the language arts

[1]Obviously, there are exceptions to this generalization, but in my own experience as a student and a teacher, I have discovered that students are more inclined to hate a work of literature than appreciate it if it is included in their curriculum. Linda M. McNeil also noticed this tendency in her study of magnet schools: "Although the students in the schools I studied did comply with course requirements in most cases, ironically they came to devalue what they learned at school. It seemed too divorced from the 'real world'. . ." Linda M. McNeil. "Contradictions of Control, Part 3: Contradictions of Reform." *Phi Delta Kappan* 69, 7 (March 1988): 480.

curriculum from a narrow perspective. . ."[2] Ribovich and Erickson, who also work with lifelong reading, complain: "Test items generally reflect a 'bits and pieces' viewpoint and overlook the simple, lifelong pursuit of reading for enjoyment and pleasure."[3] Linda McNeil in her series "Contradictions of Control" in the *Phi Delta Kappan* documents the impact of testing controls on teachers and students in magnet schools. Her study originated as an exploration of the reasons for the dynamic teaching--and dynamic student response--in underfunded magnet schools, but the study took an unexpected turn when strict testing controls were placed on the teachers in the schools under observation, and their teaching disintegrated into the lifeless methods of "defensive" teachers. McNeil writes,

> Months of daily classroom observations and interviews with teachers and students showed conclusively that teaching is very different in settings where teachers do not have to choose between meeting minimum bureaucratic standards and teaching their students.[4]

On a more local level, some suggest that the choices made by textbook selection committees, largely basal readers and anthologies, contribute to the lack of enthusiasm: "basal approaches took so much time that the reading hour provided little more than five to six minutes of sustained reading."[5] When teachers are given more freedom in their decisions of books to teach,

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[2] Joseph Sanacore. "Societal Pressures and the Need for Developing Lifetime Literacy through Independent Reading in the Schools." *The High School Journal* 72, 3 (February/March 1989): 130.

[3] Jerilyn K. Ribovich and Lawrence Erickson, "A Study of Lifelong Reading with Implications for Instructional Programs." *Journal of Reading* 20 (October 1980): 26.

[4] Linda M. McNeil. "Contradictions of Control, Part 3: Contradictions of Reform." *Phi Delta Kappan* 69, 7 (March 1988): 481.

[5] Donald Graves. "Research Currents: "When Children Respond to Fiction." *Language Arts* 66 (November 1989): 777.

their decisions may not always be much of an improvement. Peter Daw describes the problem as follows:

> When asked why these texts are used the ubiquitous phrase 'it works well' with such-and-such a year occurs in the reply. . . Too often it [the ubiquitous phrase] seems to mean that it is a text that can be read aloud (usually by the teacher) to the whole class, and that the storyline is sufficiently absorbing to guarantee a peaceful lesson! . . .Thus the choice of texts, and the way they are 'read,' are often not motivated by any agreed model of language development or the gradual enhancement of literary response, but by far more pragmatic considerations![6]

Even with works of literature that "work," students may never have a meaningful dialogue with a text.

Within the classroom itself, the lack of student enthusiasm has been attributed to inappropriate teaching methods. Louise Rosenblatt, a pioneer in response-centered literature instruction, makes a useful distinction when she dichotomizes approaches to reading into "efferent" and "aesthetic" response categories. When reading efferently, "our predominant interest is in acquiring information that we wish to retain after the reading has ended;" when reading aesthetically, we attend "mainly to what we are experiencing, thinking, and feeling *during* the reading."[7] Rosenblatt argues that much of current literature instruction encourages students to respond to literature efferently:

> Children who know that the teacher usually quizzes them on factual aspects of a reading, even if it is called 'a poem' or 'a story,' will adopt the efferent stance and will read to register the facts that will be required after the reading .[8]

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[6]Peter Daw. "Secondary English--The State and Status of the Art." *The Use of English* 37, 3 (Summer 1986): 26-27.

[7]Louise Rosenblatt. "Literature--S.O.S.!" *Language Arts* 68 (October 1991): 444. Rosenblatt's seminal work on response-based instruction, first published in 1938, is *Literature as Exploration*, New York: MLA, 1983.

[8]*Ibid.*, 447.

Robert E. Probst, who expands Rosenblatt's view in his book *Response and Analysis*, also says that the efferent approach is to blame:

> Too often [literature] has been reduced to merely the facts, the figures, and terminology of literary history and genre--to be learned, remembered briefly, and then forgotten. Literature thus presented is not likely to matter very much to the student.[9]

Ken Donelson concurs in Probst's opinion and is afraid that many teachers "want students merely to respect literature" rather than having a vital relationship with it:

> Literature is not a long hall of great writers to be admired, worshiped, all at a distance. Literature is about life and being alive and being troubled and becoming involved in all the problems. . .[10]

Along the same lines, Barry Wallenstein claims that the problems students have with poetry can be traced to our "modern utilitarian bias. . . [We] find poetry difficult or strange because it often seems to have no concrete or ulterior purpose."[11]

S. Samuel Shermis, in his *Philosophic Foundations of Education*, analyzes the goals of typical literature instruction and discovers that teachers have

> a very shaky set of assumptions: that technical considerations and meaning are independent entities in a literary work, that each is able to be taught and learned in isolation from the other, that sensitivity to the aesthetics of literature--and pleasure in it--is developed automatically from exposure to aesthetically successful works.[12]

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[9]Robert E. Probst. *Response and Analysis: Teaching Literature in Junior and Senior High School.* Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1988.

[10]Ken Donelson. "If Kids Like It, It Can't Be Literature." *English Journal* 78, 5 (September 1989): 26.

[11]Barry Wallenstein. "Why is Poetry Difficult?" *The Journal of General Education* 32,4 (Winter 1981): 247.

[12]S. Samuel Shermis. *Philosophic Foundations of Education.* New York: American Book Company, 1967: 192.

Shermis maintains that the logical outcome of such assumptions will be "dessicated and spiritless teaching" which will neutralize "whatever zest students have for literature."

Another reason for student malaise, which has both external and internal aspects, is the issue of relevance. Peter Trenouth says, "The human activities within major works are filled with complexities and ramifications, and their ponderous substances can make them seem unwieldy."[13] Adolescents have a hard time discerning the connection between formidable works of literature and their own interests. Literature may be full of humor and wit, but twenty-first century teens do not find it funny. Donelson encourages teachers to remember that "much of what amuses us as adults will almost certainly not amuse young adults."[14]

Furthermore, students are given very little opportunity to follow their own interests when teachers are afraid to relinquish their position as the "center of attention in the class."[15] Sanacore argues that students do not develop lifetime literacy because they are involved in "fragmented activities" instead of "immersion in interesting, meaningful books."[16] Douglas Hesse suggests that we should allow students to discover for themselves "what counts as literature" by offering them an opportunity to inductively compare popular literature with typically canonized works. He asks students to develop their own "canon," providing a rationale for their choices in the

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[13]Peter Trenouth. "Revealing the Unrequested: Literature's Elusive Relevance." *English Journal* 77,8 (December 1988): 23.

[14]Ken Donelson. "If Kids Like It, It Can't Be Literature." *English Journal* 78, 5 (September 1989): 25.

[15]Paul B.Janeczko and Kim Mathews. "Don't Chuck Huck: An Individualized Approach to the Classics." *English Journal* 79, 4 (April 1990): 44.

[16]Joseph Sanacore. "Societal Pressures and the Need for Developing Lifetime Literacy through Independent Reading in the Schools." *The High School Journal* 72, 3 (February/March 1989): 130.

process.[17] Arthea Reed takes a different approach to the same problem by emphasizing the advantages of utilizing young adult literature which is geared to student interests.[18]

Internal Factors

Students have trouble with the relevance of literature as a result of inappropriate materials and presentation, but they may also come to class with a bad attitude for a reason which is totally unrelated to literature or instruction. Students may have unmet basic needs such as those suggested in Maslow's hierarchy[19], they may be having a fight with their boyfriend or girlfriend, or they may be abusing drugs or alcohol.[20] David Bleich contends that all meaningful student learning has an emotional component. Unfortunately, "the only feeling consciously confronted in the classroom is frustration, and then only because this feeling stands in the way of learning. The aim is less to understand this feeling than to conquer and eliminate it."[21] Bleich maintains that an aware teacher can use student frustrations as an "occasion for insight" instead of a "hurdle to be overcome."[22]

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[17]Douglas Hesse. "Canon and Critical Thinking: An Inductive Teaching Strategy." *English Journal* 78, 7 (November 1989): 16-22.

[18]Arthea Reed. *Reaching Adolescents: The Young Adult Book and the School*. New York: CBS College Publishing, 1985.

[19]Abraham H. Maslow. *Motivation and Personality*. New York: Harper & Row, 1954: 44.

[20]This list is by no means exhaustive. More things are competing for the attention of teenagers than ever before. For example, television, after-school jobs, and extra-curricular activities all have the potential to interfere with the learning process.

[21]David Bleich. *Readings and Feelings: An Introduction to Subjective Criticism*. Urbana, Illinois: NCTE, 1975: 2.

[22]*Ibid.*

Students also bring differing ability levels to the classroom. Therefore, with any given work, there will be a continuum of responses: the lower ability students will be confused on one end of the spectrum, and the higher ability students will be bored on the other. Too often, the mixture of ability levels leads to instruction which rises only to the lowest common denominator of conceptualization. Daw asserts that unless instruction is

> very deliberately supplemented by private reading, it is not developing pupils as autonomous readers, and it also limits the books studied to those few that will appeal to, or be comprehensible to, an entire mixed (and often mixed ability) class.[23]

Thus, frustration with literature may result either from the lack of a significant challenge or the inaccessibility of the challenge.

The other major internal contribution to student frustration is the lack of meaningful background knowledge they bring to the instruction. On the level of the language itself, the vocabulary and syntax of literature may make it almost as incomprehensible as a foreign language. Teachers can forget that students reading a work for the first time are not going to have the mature insights of one who has read and taught the work countless numbers of times. Ned Scott Laff expresses it as follows:

> When we press our students we find them uncertain in their reading because they are uncertain when dealing with the concentrated and compressed use of language in literature, and often mystified by the literary effects of syntax, figures of speech, diction, and imagery.[24]

Students often feel battered by the difficulty of the language itself.

Lack of background knowledge is not limited to facility with language, however. Adolescents are not yet acquainted with many of the ideas which

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[23]Peter Daw. "Secondary English--The State and Status of the Art," *The Use of English* 37, 3 (Summer 1986): 26-27.

[24]Ned Scott Laff. "Teaching the Text in Class." *College English* 46, 5 (September 1984): 493-94.

make literature interesting for adults. For E.D. Hirsch and his cultural literacy cohorts, high school should be a place that initiates students into a body of western cultural values and information.[25] Hirsch and his colleagues insist that students should acquire a definable body of information because it is good for them; they ignore the issue of student interest entirely.

Rosenblatt refers to students' background knowledge as the "reservoir of past experience with language and the world" which they bring to a confrontation with a text. Each student has a unique reservoir influencing his or her perceptions of meaning. After the student responds, the experience with the literature "flows into the reservoir brought to the next reading event."[26] Therefore, the complexity of students' responses to a work of literature is dependent on cumulative experiences. When their literary reservoirs are almost empty, they are not likely to have "literary" responses.

Analysis

In the last couple of decades, Americans have been obsessed with the quality of their schools. Pundits continually wield statistics to confirm that large numbers of Americans leave school with dismally inadequate educations. Legislators and other elected officials (school board officials, for example) feel a compulsion to show their concern for the decline in public education, so they invent and institute vast, standardized testing schemes

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[25]E.D. Hirsch, Jr., Joseph F. Kett, and James Trefil. *The Dictionary of Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988. In their *Dictionary*, Hirsch et al give a clear picture of their own cultural values but not necessarily a normative body of knowledge. I have found a useful application for the *Dictionary*, however, and that is as a reference to help explain cultural idiosyncrasies to international students. As such, I would rename the book, *The Dictionary of Western/American Cultural Information: What Some International Students May Be Interested in Finding Out*.

[26]Louise Rosenblatt. "Literature--S.O.S.!" *Language Arts* 68 (October 1991): 445.

(like the ISTEP in Indiana) to make sure that students are learning and teachers are teaching. Essentially, the testing programs function as an enormous, and enormously expensive, quality control check on the "output" of our educational assembly lines. They assure us that a uniform product is being produced. Unfortunately, as McNeil concludes in her study of magnet schools,

> Good teaching can't be engineered into existence. But an engineering approach to schooling can crowd out good teaching. . . These reforms [competency testing schemes] take a cynical view of teachers' ability to contribute constructively to schooling; they choose to make the content, the assessment of students, and the decisions about pedagogy all teacher-proof, so that a standardized model will become the norm.[27]

In my estimation, these programs are not only teacher-proof, they are student enjoyment-proof. Instead of involving students in a dynamic, enjoyable exploration connected to their own interests, we force-feed them a bland formula for success on a standardized test.

Central to this entire problem is the confusion that exists at a foundational level about the purpose of literature education. Most literature teachers, if asked, would maintain that the purpose of their instruction is to infect young people with an appreciation of literature. If we are desirous of raising the level of appreciation in our students, which I would argue is a worthwhile goal, then we must recognize that the vast majority of our instruction is a sorry failure: it has the completely opposite effect. We pour "imperial gallons of facts"[28] into our students and teach them to read

[27]Linda M. McNeil. "Contradictions of Control, Part 3: Contradictions of Reform." *Phi Delta Kappan* 69, 7 (March 1988): 485.

[28]This brief quote from Charles Dickens' *Hard Times* indicates that this discussion is not unique to our era. Dickens was tremendously concerned about the way that schools in his day choked and killed children's imaginations by forcing them to learn only "useful" facts. Charles Dickens. *Hard Times*. Middlesex, UK: Penguin, 1985: 48.

literature efferently, but students miss the profundity, humor, and drama of literature entirely.

In spite of the obvious failure to achieve the goal of inspiring students with an interest in literature, for the most part, teachers continue to teach literature the same way. The reasons teachers resist change in the way they teach literature are probably as diverse as the reasons for students' animosity to the instruction. Teaching over one hundred students every day requires a tremendous amount of stamina. Many teachers feel that they simply do not have the energy to try something new. They would rather stay with a teaching style which is familiar to them, even though it is ineffective, than invest time and energy in a new approach which they perceive to be fraught with risk. I suspect that some teachers are afraid that if they abandon the old methods, they will be depriving their students of something vitally important. The logic behind this attitude is the same as the logic often applied to health food: if it tastes terrible, it is good for you. In other words, teachers recognize that their students hate literature, but they console themselves with the thought that their instruction will be good for their students in the long run, even if it only builds character in them. Additionally, some teachers rely on comments in textbook margins because they feel insecure about their own authority to interpret literature. Ironically, this same insecurity often causes teachers to be afraid to relinquish their roles as benevolent (or malevolent) dictators. They are afraid they will lose control of their class if they give students a chance to discuss relevant issues.

Teachers are also reluctant to allow the discussion of literature to follow unpredictable courses because they fear reprisals from their administrators and communities. This is at least partially due to the increasingly litigious nature of our society. Literature raises issues which are

inherently controversial, and many teachers short-circuit student interest by avoiding the issues altogether. The themes of "great" literature are painfully relevant for teenagers, but teachers are afraid to allow their students to confront them. Although the issues are too complex and dynamic to be satisfactorily reduced to objective test questions, they often are anyway.

In his most recent work on reflective inquiry, Shermis summarizes the problem of teacher resistance well when he says,

> Therefore, while virtually no one intentionally opposes reflective thinking [or reflective inquiry into literature] in principle, certain conventions, traditions, and unverbalized anxieties have thus far prevented reflective teaching from taking hold in schools.[29]

In essence, although many teachers agree in principle with encouraging reflective inquiry, critical thinking, and problem-solving activities into their classrooms, their grasp of the theoretical underpinnings of such a position is not sufficiently strong to motivate them to make changes in their established modes of teaching.

Further complicating matters is the confusion which exists about the meaning of appreciation and the process one uses to go about acquiring it. In spite of extensive evidence to the contrary, many teachers persist in believing that students will learn to appreciate "great" literature if they are exposed to enough of it. Rosenblatt's dichotomy between efferent and aesthetic readings is apropos to this discussion. The ability to locate names, places, and plot events in a work hardly qualifies as mature appreciation, even though such an ability may be an aspect of the process of appreciation. An understanding of what is happening in a text can help lead one to an overall aesthetic response which also contains emotional elements. Readers bring the

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[29]S.Samuel Shermis. *Critical Thinking: Helping Students Learn Reflectively.* Bloomington, IN: ERIC, 1992: 13.

"reservoir" of their life and literary experiences to the text and have a unique appreciative interaction. Too often teachers have students read to find minutia, and they shut down or preempt any opportunity for a complete, emotions included, appreciation. Shermis explains the components of appreciation as follows:

> What is meant by appreciation? The answer, certainly in part, is that appreciation involves two processes simultaneously. The individual feels, that is, he or she has an emotional response. The other aspect of the response is that the individual knows something, that is, there is cognition, understanding, knowledge. Mind you, I insist that these two processes occur at one and the same time, and to divide them, to emphasize one over the other, to do as many teachers do, which is to make kids memorize details, misses the entire point of teaching literature.[30]

The fact that most students leave high school hating literature instead of appreciating it indicates that something is seriously wrong with our approach to fostering appreciation.

Implications

If we really want students to start enjoying literature, we need to broaden our understanding of appreciation, we need to give students a chance to build their own reservoirs of literary experience, and we need to orient our class discussions to topics which are relevant and vital to students' felt needs and desires.

As I argued above, teachers have had a relatively narrow view of the process of appreciation. Paradoxically, most literature teachers become literature teachers because they have learned to value and appreciate literature. They fail to contaminate their students with their passion for

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[30]S. Samuel Shermis. Personal Communication. March 1992.

literature, however, because they have not analyzed the factors influencing their own responses. It sounds tautological, but teachers enjoy literature because it gives them pleasure. They understand what is happening in the works they read, that is, they notice the details, but they also have emotional reactions. If it were not for the emotional aspects of their appreciation, they would never say to friends, "This is such a good book; you have to read it." If teachers were obligated to pass multiple choice tests for every book they read, they would probably lose interest as quickly as their students.

Additionally, if teachers were honest with themselves and with others, I suspect that they many of them would confess to reading large quantities of "trash," i.e. books which are not generally included on lists of classics. As a literature teacher, I sincerely enjoy reading ponderous literary works, but when I am recovering at the end of an intense semester, I tend to ignore the classics in favor of spy novels and contemporary biographies. In my lifetime, I have read hundreds (maybe thousands) of books which have little recognized literary value, but those same books have swollen my response reservoir considerably and have contributed to the pleasure I derive from weightier material.

We have been afraid for too long that if we allow students to follow their own interests in reading and responding to literature, they will miss out on the "really important stuff." I propose that students will completely ignore the "really important stuff" unless we not only give them the liberty to follow their own reading interests first, but also vigorously encourage them to do just that. Their self-motivated reading is a vital part of being initiated into the world of manipulated language. Shermis comments,

> It may seem iconoclastic to the teacher to recommend that the student read "trash" as a part of forming literary taste. But if we talk with adults

> who read widely and who possess considerable discrimination, we are likely to find that their early reading was wide and, at first, not discriminating.[31]

It appears that students form taste in literature by acquiring a "standard of comparison by which literary value may be judged."[32]

In addition to giving students the opportunity to read books in which they are interested, we need to transform class discussion from an efferent, "objective" question and answer session to a student-centered, aesthetic adventure. When students are given permission to explore in a work of literature, they will discover uncomfortably pertinent questions. If we insist that we want our students to become critical thinkers, we cannot afford to avoid controversial (and interesting) topics. Indeed, students resent being herded away from timely issues. McNeil discovered the following:

> The defensive teaching strategy that most offended the students I talked with in the *Contradictions of Control* study was the tendency of teachers to omit topics that were extremely current or controversial.[33]

By shying away from such topics, literature teachers reinforce the conclusion that most students have unfortunately already reached: literature has nothing to do with real life.

Conclusion

The answer to the question, "Why do students hate literature?" is not easily reduced to simplistic terms. Students may erect barriers to literature for a variety a different reasons, and their reasons may be different at different times in their lives. If we are serious about infecting students with a passion for literature, however, we need to implement sensitively applied,

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[31]S. Samuel Shermis. *Philosophic Foundations of Education*. New York: American Book Company, 1967: 193.

[32]*Ibid.*

[33]Linda M. McNeil. "Contradictions of Control, Part 3: Contradictions of Reform." *Phi Delta Kappan* 69, 7 (March 1988): 482.

theoretically sound approaches to literature instruction which connect meaningfully to student needs and aspirations. Literature will be important to adolescents when we replace their uneasy awe of the inaccessable with a vital awareness of the relevance of literature to every aspect of human experience.